

Read- Deuteronomy 31:1-8, Heidelberg Catechism Lord's Day 1

Two of the most basic things we need as people in order to survive and to thrive are **belonging** and **freedom**.

Belonging is deeply important.

We need to be held, to be loved, nurtured and fussed over. Even when we are babies.

We need to know that our presence counts, that we matter. We need to know that people count on us and that we have people to count on.

Many years ago when the Christian Reformed Church was going through a really turbulent time and people were leaving to form more conservative churches, my friend Jane came to church one morning, only to discover that her parents and all her siblings had left for another church, not telling her, her husband or their children. She never got over that feeling of being abandoned.

One of the most painful questions for adoptees can be 'why was I given up?'. This question can bring an inner conflict when they also deeply love and feel loyalty to their adoptive parents.

In her album 'The Foundling' Mary Gauthier sings soothing lullaby words, 'Mama's here... and then, in the same tones and with the same notes, sings the most terrifying words, 'Mama's gone'.

Without a sense of belonging we are vulnerable to others who know how to work with that vulnerability. They tell us, 'you can belong if you do this', 'you will belong when you are this...' 'Gangs and pimps work with that basic human need.

We need to belong.

And yet, within the same family or the same group, 'belonging' can feel stifling. Security can feel like we cannot breathe. We need space. We need room. We need freedom to be our own person, to discover ourselves apart from our families or church communities. We need to take on the responsibility for our own lives, to meet our own challenges and to hazard our own risks.

Some of us need to travel farther than others. But, we all need freedom.

Belonging and freedom.

Connection and separateness.

Dependence and interdependence.

It is a challenge for us all as parents to know when to hold and when to let go. When to embrace and when to refrain from embracing. (Ecclesiastes)

Which brings us to the catechism. Part of the genius of the catechism, and of this question and answer most of all, is that it plugs the gospel of Jesus Christ straight into our needs for belonging and freedom.

Listen: 'What is your only comfort in life and in death?'

'That I **belong** to Jesus'.

I belong to Jesus Christ above all others. This is my comfort.

Jesus has bought me. Jesus has laid down his life for me. Jesus saw me as worth loving, as worth saving, even as worth dying for.

My only, my deepest, rock-bottom source of comfort is that I belong to Jesus Christ.

He is still taking more disciples by the way, and if you have never done so yet, I invite you to follow him. I invite you to give yourself right now to his claim on your life.

His promise is this: 'I will never leave you nor forsake you. I am the one who will be with you wherever you go'.

From anyone else, those words might sound stifling. We need space, even from, those we love. When you take a bathroom break just to get some space from your three year old, and then you see ten little fingers reaching under the bathroom door, you know you need a bit of space, even from your dear, sweet child.

But Jesus does not say, 'you will never get away from me'. He tells us that he will never be the one to walk out on us.

It is in **belonging** to Jesus that we find **freedom**:

Listen to all the ways the catechism writers describe life with Jesus as freedom.

We find freedom from our sins.

Jesus has released us, set us free from the debt of our sins. He gives us freedom from guilt and shame. Our freedom is the freedom of a prisoner as the prison door swings open in front of her and she is free to go.

Jesus has broken the power of the devil over us. It is a sad irony of history that so many African countries went from new-found freedom from their colonial masters to the tyranny of dictators. Today we see those dictators fall. Saddam Hussein is gone. Hosni Mubarak is on trial. Moammar Ghaddafi is on the way out. All either gone or living with numbered days. The people are free of their tyrants. When you watch the news and see people struggling, fighting, even dying and celebrating their freedom, remember that Jesus has set us free from the tyranny of the devil. The devil's power over us has been broken by the stronger power of love. We are free to discover what a life of freedom is like.

We have freedom in Jesus' watchful care. His freedom is the freedom of confidence that he will always keep us and watch over us. We are free to explore life, and free to follow where Jesus leads.

We have freedom from fear of death. By his Spirit, whispering, encouraging, promising, we are told again and again, 'death is not the end of you', 'you have life now and forever with me'. As we age, as the time or the fact of our own death comes closer, Jesus gives us freedom from crippling fear. We have nothing to fear from death. It has become the doorway into new and everlasting life.

We have freedom to serve. Again, the catechism credits the ministry of the Holy Spirit. 'The Spirit makes me wholeheartedly willing and ready from now on to live for

Jesus'. **Disciples want to do.** We want to live for Jesus. We want to make a difference for him here and now. Nothing in our past disqualifies us from serving him. We are free to serve Jesus together.

Belonging and freedom. Belonging to Jesus now and always. Freedom from guilt and shame, freedom from the devil, freedom in Jesus' care, freedom from fear of death, freedom to serve. This year these are the themes we will come back to.

For today, here is a challenge for us as leaders.

Remember that Jesus' people belong first and last to Jesus.

Celebrate the forgiveness we have, remind us all to 'live loved'.

Challenge and call us when we live in false slavery, call us to surrender control. One of the things about living a long time in a 'cell', is that those limits come to define life for us. Even when the door is open, even when the bars are taken away, we can live as if we are still in prison to old ways of life, old limits, old fears, old habits. So call us all to come and live.

Remind and assure us of eternal life. We need that.

Put Jesus' people to work. There is a whole crowd of people of all ages and amazing gifts every week who say together, 'I am wholeheartedly willing and ready from now on to live for Jesus'. It is a particular Reformed Christian insight to say that the first place and way we live for Jesus is in our own daily routines. Here on Labour Day weekend we say that there is no distinction between different kinds of work done for Jesus. Sometimes you will hear people say, 'I do this terrible, boring, dull job, to

support my real passion, 'kingdom work'. Or parents will get excited because their children want to work for the church. The good news is that all of life is kingdom of Jesus work. A friend of ours here spent last week working at a wastewater treatment facility in Edmonton. Let's just say you don't want to live down wind of these places. But what is more important in life, for creation, than clean water? It matters to Jesus, all of our work does.

So that first. But, or 'and', as leaders in the church we need to see the people that Jesus gathers here as people in whom the Holy Spirit has put this deep longing in endless ways and with endless gifts to do something for Jesus. It is present in children, and it never really ever dies away. It changes over the years and our energy and time in life factors into it, but we want to make a difference for Jesus as long as we live.

So, you leaders and administrators, 'put us to work', 'use us'.

The Lord be gracious to you,

The Lord be gracious to me,

And all God's people said, Amen.